

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 19, 2019

Mr. Jonathan Hayes
Director
Office of Refugee Resettlement
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Director Hayes,

The Inland Empire has a long history of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, from the Vietnamese “boat people” in the 1970s to Central American refugees today. Our local governments and non-profits have worked successfully with appropriate government agencies to provide temporary shelter and to integrate those who wish to become part of our community. Therefore, we were shocked to learn that Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is taking steps to open a facility in the Inland Empire to house up to 430 unaccompanied migrant children, without appropriate congressional notification or community input, especially given our community’s extensive experience with these issues. Time after time, the Trump Administration has subjected immigrant children to prolonged detention in horrible conditions, and we have serious concerns about any plans that would allow these abuses to happen in our community.

Our top priority must be the safety and well-being of children. Since last year, at least seven children have died in US custody. Congress passed H.R. 3401, the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Humanitarian Assistance and Security at the Southern Border Act, on a bipartisan basis and President Trump signed it into law. The law provides \$2.88 billion to ORR to ensure children have safe and sanitary accommodations while in detention. The law also requires the agency to prioritize expanding transitional foster care settings over large-scale institutional facilities for migrant children. We are troubled and concerned that ORR is moving to open a large-scale facility in contravention to the supplemental funding bill. We are also very frustrated that ORR moved to open a facility without contacting any local stakeholders or soliciting community input.

ORR is tasked with the responsibility of caring for migrant children. Yet, the Trump Administration has left children living in inadequate facilities that are similar to jails. Sec. 301 of H.R. 3401 requires HHS to “prioritize use of community based residential care (including long-term and transitional foster care and small group homes) and shelter care other than large-scale institutional shelter facilities to house unaccompanied alien children in the custody of [HHS].” Transitional foster care is better suited to provide individualized attention to children than a large-scale shelter. This will help children to be placed with sponsors quickly. That is why we are gravely concerned about the proposed shelter construction in the Inland Empire, where there are many service providers and community-based care options like family members and foster parents that are more suitable settings for these children.

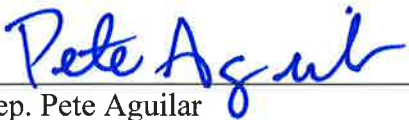
Please answer the following questions to ensure ORR is moving forward with the best interest of children in custody:

- Why is ORR moving to open new facilities to house children if the supplemental funding bill requires the agency to prioritize community-based residential care?
- What does ORR consider to be “large-scale institutional shelters”? Is this category based off a certain number of immigrant children living in a facility? Would the facility in the Inland Empire be considered a “large-scale institutional shelter”?
- If a lease is obtained, can ORR commit to not expanding the center to house more children?
- How many non-profits or third-party organizations in the Inland Empire has ORR contacted to expand transitional foster care for unaccompanied migrant children? How many organizations has ORR contacted across the country?
- What is the timeline to open a facility in the Inland Empire?
- What steps will ORR take to solicit input from the community on the proposed shelter?
- What is the justification for a full lease term of 17 years?

H.R. 3401 also requires ORR to contact the Appropriations Committee within 72 hours of conducting a formal assessment of a facility for a lease or acquisition. As ORR evaluates whether properties are suitable for the care of children, we expect the agency to follow through with reporting requirements.

For any questions related to this request, please contact Rep. Aguilar’s office at 202-225-3201.

Sincerely,



Rep. Pete Aguilar
Member of Congress



Rep. Mark Takano
Member of Congress



Rep. Norma Torres
Member of Congress



Rep. Raul Ruiz
Member of Congress